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CONCLUSION

The trickster lacks a stable identity, but is able to reproduce any identity as an artistically imitated role: s/he slips betwixt and between the antinomies of the social, political, and cultural order, and is constantly ambivalent and elusive, destructive and constructive, malevolent and benevolent; as such, this character appears to be the classic example of the floating (or empty) signifier—a signifier with "a zero symbolic value." (Lévi-Strauss, 64) While explaining the meaning of *mana* (magic energy, force) in the ethnographic theory of Marcel Mauss, Claude Lévi-Strauss emphasized the two major semiotic functions of floating signifiers: 1) they are necessary to overcome "a fundamental opposition, in the history of human mind, between symbolism, which is characteristically discontinuous, and knowledge characterized by continuity"(60);
2) "always and everywhere, those types of notions, somewhat like algebraic symbols, occur to represent an indeterminate value of signification, in itself devoid of meaning and thus susceptible of receiving any meaning at all; their sole function is to fill a gap between the signifier and the signified, or, more exactly, to signal the fact that in such a circumstance, on such an occasion, or in such a one of their manifestations, a relationship of non-equivalence becomes established between signifier and signified, to the detriment of the prior complementary relationship" (55-56).

What do these functions of a floating signifier mean when applied to Soviet tricksters? First of all, as floating signifiers, Soviet tricksters embody the chasm and unrecoverable contradictions between the symbolic languages through which Soviet society modeled and described itself, on the one hand, and social practices that developed in a relative independence from these languages, on the other. Soviet double-speak and double-thought are only a few examples of these practices; rather, our examination of tricksters permits us to detect the co-existence of two parallel and mutually contradictory realms in Soviet society and

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its culture—the symbolic and the practical. These realities are certainly aware of each other's existence, they constantly overlap and collide in the space of the individual subjectivity; however, they lack channels of mutual communication—and this very *lack* can be defined as crucial to the "closed" character of the Soviet society.

Our study demonstrates that tricksters provided symbolic justifications for the broad array of "shadow" social practices, unacknowledged by or repressed by the symbolic languages—the intellectual freedom (Khulio), the "second economy" (Ostap Bender) and underground art (Venichka), the intelligentsia's conformism (Buratino, Stierlitz), and its modest rebellions against universal cynicism (Detochkin, Buzykin, Munchhausen). Furthermore, books and films about Soviet tricksters taken together provide the most extensive image of the *universe of Soviet cynicism*—with its bricolage language and schizophrenic social psychology as revealed in Il'f and Petrov's diptych, its art and the philosophy of the artist as a free marionette, exemplified by Tolstoy's *Zolotoi kliuchik*, with its metaphysics based on the betrayal of the individual voice by the Logos as investigated by Erofeev in *Moskva-Petushki* and its politics of a double game for the sake of an impeccable alibi in any situation as vividly presented (albeit through a historical "transfer" to the image of the enemy, the other) in *Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny* by Tatiana Lioznova. The trickster texts created in the post-Soviet period—as exemplified by Pelevin—testify to the fact that the cynical universe did not disappear with the collapse of the Soviet regime; conversely, it solidified and expanded, producing its own political structure (the society of shape-shifters) and mythology. Apparently, tricksters serve as the living *connection* between the Soviet and post-Soviet societies.

At the same time, as floating signifiers, Soviet tricksters paradoxically *overcome* these chasms and contradictions by transforming the communicative gap into a space of "freeplay"—to use Derrida's term—between signifiers of the symbolic language and their multiple (mutually contradictory) signifieds in social practice, and vice versa. Thus the trickster demonstrates the totally linguistic (and playful) nature of both the symbolic and the practical levels of Soviet subjectivity, and restores its unity and coherence—albeit in a performative dimension. The Soviet trickster grants to the Soviet cynical universe "the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered

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to an active interpretation. *This affirmation then determines the non-center otherwise than as loss of the center.* And it plays without security." (Derrida, 518) The mechanism of "freeplay" also serves as the leverage with which the Soviet trickster elevates cynical practices to the level of a kynical performance, and most importantly, manifests the kynical *embodiment,*—the faculty that, according to Sloterdijk, is opposed to the cynical splitting of consciousness and subjectivity immanent for the cynical aspect of modernity (see Sloterdijk, 120–124).

In all the texts that we discussed above, the trickster simultaneously symbolically justifies the discourses and practices of soviet cynicism and confronts them, in both cases using kynicism as a performative weapon. In this respect, the trickster as a floating signifier appears as the empty center (non-center, according to Derrida) of Soviet cynicism. Without it, the Soviet social machine as well as Soviet subjectivity could not have functioned for so long. Simultaneously, Soviet tricksters also continuously generated and embodied the critical impulse that eventually undermined the Soviet civilization from the inside, leading to its demise. Granted, all of the practices that required the trickster's symbolic justification stemmed from the "closed" nature of the Soviet society—from the ban on the market economy and non-existent freedom of expression to the ideological monopoly and political xenophobia. Yet, our analysis permits us to maintain that the "place" of the trickster in Soviet culture is defined by the contradictions between the classical model of the "closed" society and Soviet social practices: the trickster flourishes where the Soviet "closedness" undermines itself and, for the sake of survival, generates the "shadow" mechanism of social, economic, cultural and political mobility and flexibility that sustained it for more than seventy years.

At the same time, the trickster represents the hero whose superiority over his/her opponents is grounded in its intellect, imagination and talent—and never on violence and terror. In other words, this character serves as the manifestation of the intelligentsia's dream about a victory of wit over a power based on violence, about non-violent power, or even more so, about the non-violent strategies of modernization. This theme becomes especially noticeable in post-Soviet culture—not only in Pelevin's *Sviashchennaia kniga oborotnia,* but also, and most explicitly, in Lev Gurskii (Roman Arbitman)'s "mockumentary" novel *Roman Arbitman: Biografiia vtorogo prezidenta Rossii* (*Roman Arbitman: The*

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Biography of the Second President of Russia, 2008). The novel's second president in question is not a KGB officer, but a former philologist, who succeeds Yeltsin in power. This president, Roman Il'ich Arbitman, is directly compared with Ostap Bender—one of the political analysts "cited" in Gurskii's book writes about the "second president": "If the place of Lenin and Stalin would be taken by someone like Il'f and Petrov's Ostap Bender, probably, Russia would have reached capitalism not by such a long, curved and painful path." (Gurskii, 141) At the same time, this trickster is quite "cleansed," much like the tricksters from the Soviet films of the late 1960s through the early 1980s—symptomatically, all of the destructive aspects of the trickster are given to the prime-minister Boris Berezovskii (whom Arbitman gets rid of very promptly). One of the Russian critics reasonably called this book a "liberal utopia" (Fishman), although it should be necessary to add that this is an ironic utopia of the trickster in power. This tongue-in-cheek biography of "the second president" accompanied by a long list of fictitious sources and with well-known political figurants (although with different patronymics) as its characters, is written along the lines of recent post-Soviet history and is intended to be read in direct comparison with it. The main difference concerns those moments in post-Soviet history that are marked by either violence or by political cynicism. Yet, when the actual authorities employed violence or cynical manipulations, the book's protagonist, Roman Arbitman, uses witty tricks—intellectual and cultural, rather than political—thus peacefully resolving such painful issues as the war in Chechnya, army hazing, corruption, relations with the West, the Khodorkovskii affair, etc. Arbitman substitutes for the tank assault on Grozny a competition between Yeltsin and Johar Dudaev in the composition of Japanese *tanka* (which Yeltsin intentionally loses, thus avoiding a military conflict); he resolves the tension between the oligarchs through a football game; he launches numerous TV shows seeking people with extra-sensory abilities all across Russia, only to appoint these X-men to strategic positions in the government: he invites the famous magicians David Copperfield and Uri Geller to lead the FSB and MVD; and he passes presidential power—by the means of free elections of course—to a popular comedian… In the end, it is even hinted that Arbitman is related to Superman, at least by a connection to Krypton. The result of these tricks appears to be quite opposite to the well-known reality: by the end of his 8-year tenure in office "the

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second president of Russia" leaves to his successor a liberal and peaceful country, respected by its neighbors and fully integrated into the world community. Arbitman's "recipes" for the liberalization of Russia are obviously ironic and humorous (although they quite seriously point at the political significance of the cultural tools of power); however, they manifest a very important aspect of all Soviet and post-Soviet tricksters—they represent the non-violent and non-repressive strategies for modernization. This function of the trickster appears to be equally relevant to the Soviet and post-Soviet societies.

However, the collapse of the Soviet "closed society," despite expectations, did not lead to the triumph of "openness," liberalism, and democracy, precisely because the *alternative* to the Soviet social and cultural order lay in "cynical reason," which served as the *necessary condition* for the effective functioning of the Soviet societal organism. In fact, there is no exaggeration in saying that the collapse of late Soviet culture can be interpreted as the result of a quiet cynical revolution, during which "cynical reason" infiltrated all spheres and institutions of social life and eroded them from the inside to the point of their collapse. In this perspective, the post-Soviet society should be interpreted as the triumph of the former Soviet "cynical reason," which acquires the functions of the official mainstream in cultural, social, ideological, and economic spheres.

Notably, in the post-Soviet period, the trickster starts to directly influence "real" politics and public culture, literally moving into the sphere of power—while in the past the bond between the trickster and the power was mainly located in the sphere of the cultural imagination. The aforementioned link between Stierlitz and Putin is just one such example; one may also recollect such fantastic political tricksters of the 1990s as Dmitrii Iakubovskii ("General Dima"); Boris Berezovskii; as well as the veteran of the post-Soviet politics, member of the Russian Duma since its formation in 1989, and the head of the Liberal-Democratic quasi-party, Vladimir Zhirinovskii. A pure trickster, Kseniia Sobchak—a daughter of the late liberal of the Yeltsin era, Anatolii Sobchak—became the main symbol of the post-Soviet glamorous culture. Quite telling in this respect—not as a fact, but as a possibility—is the rumor that the postmodernist "gangsta fiction" novel, *Okolonolia* (*Around Zero*) published in 2009 under the pseudonym Natan Dubovitskii, was purportedly written by Vladislav Surkov, the main Kremlin ideologist

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and the creator of such aggressively conservative movements as "Nashi," "Molodaia gvardiia," etc. (see L'vovskii 2009).

Yet, "cynical reason" does not support the "open society," as Sloterdijk has demonstrated; rather, it represents the "enlightened false consciousness" (6) and cultivates tendencies potentially leading to totalitarian "reductionism." Aside from being an inseparable part of the Soviet societal organism, the discourse and the practices of "cynical reason" inevitably bear the imprints of the symbolic order to which they served as the alternative. This interconnection between cynical reason and the Soviet symbolic order transforms the former into the hostage of the latter—which becomes especially obvious in the 2000s.

While "cynical reason" was triumphantly moving away from the "shadow" and into the spotlight, the trickster's function could not help but change, too. First, from the 1970s onwards, cynicism needs less and less cultural legitimation—hence, the kynical aspects of the trickster's representation either fade away (as in Detochkin and Buzykin) or take a clearly non-conformist turn, as in Pelevin's A Huli, or in the works of such artists-tricksters as Oleg Kulik, Vladislav Mamyshev-Monro, and the "Blue Noses" group (Aleksandr Shaburov and Viachelsav Mizin). But, simultaneously, the very position of the trickster undergoes something comparable with the "automatization of the device," to use Victor Shklovsky's term. A symptomatic illustration to this process may be found in numerous TV, film and theatre productions based on classic Soviet texts about tricksters—such as, for instance, the TV mini-series *Master i Margarita* by Vladimir Bortko and *Zolotoi telenok* (2006) by Uliana Shilkova; as well as the musicals based on *Dvenadtsat' stuliev*—by Tigran Keosaian and Aleksandr Tsekalo (2003) and by Maksim Papernik (2004). All these productions either transform the tricksters into lifeless monuments to themselves (as in the cases of Bortko's and Shilkova's mini-series) or represent them as vulgar thugs, thus trivializing the character (as in the musicals).

In other words, the appreciation of the trickster's role in post-Soviet culture is accompanied by a distancing from this cultural function as far too accessible, too widely used and abused, as a stereotype that does not produce any new meanings due to its automatization.

Tellingly, the 2009 cluster on artists-tricksters in the Moscow-based magazine *Art-Khronika* opens with an article by the St. Petersburg critic Dmitrii Ozerkov, who states quite emphatically that "it is easy to become

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a trickster today. It is much harder not to become it" (60).

Thus, with the triumphant expansion of "cynical reason," post-Soviet culture demonstrates very ambivalent attitudes to tricksters. Instead of referring to the inner contradictions of the hidden mechanisms of the Soviet "closed society," the trickster as the floating signifier starts to refer to "cynical reason" itself, and in this capacity becomes the object of cultural critique. This approach is applicable not only to Pelevin's novel discussed above, but also to the Presniakov brothers' play and Kirill Serebrennikov's film *Izobrazhaia zhertvu* (*Performing Victim*, 2006) or to numerous radically innovative theatrical productions based on Gogol—such as, for example, *Revizor* (*Inspector General*, 2005) in Kolyada-Theatre in Ekaterinburg or Aleksandr Pantykin's opera *Mertvye dushi* (*Dead Souls*, 2009). Furthermore, the post-Soviet culture presents enough examples of the demonization of the trickster as in Aleksandr Zel'dovich' and Vladimir Sorokin's film *Moskva* (*Moscow*, 2002) and Vasily Sigarev's *Volchok* (*The Wolfy*, 2009), as well as in Dmitrii Bykov's novel *ZhD* (2006) and Pelevin's *Empire V* (2007).

At the same time, the presence and the significance of tricksters in contemporary Russian literature and film is noticeably lower than in previous periods, and especially lower than in, for instance, contemporary American culture, which was literally flooded by aesthetically sound and socially meaningful tricksters in the 2000s. One may recall Sacha Baron Cohen (*Borat*, 2006, and *Bruno,* 2009), such influential political analysts/tricksters as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, such film tricksters as the fierce Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) from *Fight Club* (the 2004 movie by David Fincher based on Chuck Palahniuk's novel), the almost-tragic Joker (Heath Ledger in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, 2008), the light-hearted Frank Abagnale, Jr. (Leonardo Di Caprio in Steven Spielberg's *Catch Me If You Can*, 2002), the maliciously and hedonistically conniving Cartman from Trey Parker and Matt Stone's animated series *South Park*, a whole bunch of magicians as tricksters-by-trade (*The Prestige* [2006] by Christopher Nolan, *The Illusionist* [2006] by Neil Burger, *Scoop* [2006] by Woody Allen), and many others. Russian society under Putin was hardly less cynical than its American counterpart, yet it did not generate a comparable amount of aesthetically powerful images of tricksters.

In this respect, the high or low activity of the trickster in contemporary culture may be interpreted as a *symptom*. One may conclude that *tricksters flourish in culture when society is over-saturated*

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by cynicism and is aware of this; in these images the excess of cynicism is channeled and turned against its own sources. Tricksters serve as cultural "leukocytes," whose commotion stands in direct proportion to social "infections'"—cynical and potentially proto-fascist, as well as proto-totalitarian. But if the "illness" is quite obvious, yet the organism's reaction remains passive, then the society is either not aware of its own cynicism (or does not perceive it as a problem), or its cultural "immunity" is weakened and cannot resist the "infection." It looks like both of these scenarios are unfolding in Russian culture today—otherwise, it would be flooded by the trickster novels and films.

However, it would be too early to declare that the history of the trickster in Russian culture is over. The trickster as a floating signifier possesses at least one more cultural referent, the exploration of which is only beginning in Russian culture.The trickster's representation of the social world as a space for language games paradoxically points at the trauma which their strategies inadvertently reflect and evade. In a certain way, the trickster is the cultural embodiment of the cynical *jouissance*, which, according to Lacan and Žižek, is necessarily associated with trauma—the trauma(s) of modernity, in the trickster's case: "Pain generates surplus-enjoyment via the magic reversal-into-itself by means of which the very material texture of our expression of pain… gives rise to enjoyment […] *Jouissance*… emerges when *the very symbolic articulation of the Loss gives rise to a pleasure of its own*." (Žižek 1997: 47, italics are the author's). The trauma, in turn, leads to the Lacanian Real—the unconscious zone of existence and experience which cannot be inscribed into the language practices. In the article "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter in Politics?" Ernesto Laclau maintains that empty (floating) signifiers "are trying to signify the limits of signification—the real, if you want, in the Lacanian sense—and there is no direct way of doing so except through the subversion of the process of signification itself." (Laclau, 407) The trickster's encounter with the Real, and his/her immersion in historical traumas, may be interpreted as the ultimate goal of this character's quest for an anti-hierarchical and anti-systemic sacred—a kynical freedom in a cynical world. *Moskva-Petushki* by Venedikt Erofeev and especially its tragic finale may serve as the best illustration to this meaning of the trickster as a floating signifier. Glimpses of this meaning are also detectable in Khurenito's suicide, the final chapters of *Zolotoi telenok,* Detochkin's transformation

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into Hamlet and back into a prisoner and Buzykin's endless marathon along the streets of Leningrad, and the scene where oil is summoned by howling at the skull of the sacred cow in *Sviashchennaia kniga oborotnia*… The direction this quest must take is marked by the tricksters alone, and its elucidation has barely begun, let alone been accomplished, though its vital necessity for contemporary Russian culture is obvious.

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